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Urban Neoliberal Debt Peonage: Prisoner Reentry, Work, and the New Jim Crow

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Abstract: Urban Neoliberal Debt Peonage: Prisoner Reentry, Work, and the New Jim Crow

In this study, I analyze the experiences of people leaving prison and jail, utilizing the concept of urban neoliberal debt peonage. I define urban neoliberal debt peonage as the push of race-class subjugated [RCS] formerly incarcerated people into the low wage labor market. I argue that urban neoliberal debt peonage is a social process of economic extraction from and racial control of RCS groups structured by state bureaucracies and corporate employers. I provide evidence for this argument using participant observation and interview methods in a large northeastern U.S. city at an employment-oriented prisoner reentry organization that I call "Afterward." People came to Afterward seeking employment, but were forwarded to work that was often unstable and unable to support subsistence living. Unstable low wage work did not alter people's social and economic situations enough to preclude them from engaging in income-producing criminal activity that comes with the risk of reincarceration. Meanwhile the criminal justice system extracted money from the formerly incarcerated via debt collection, and corporate employers benefited from neoliberal policies that give them tax breaks for hiring Afterward clients. While not identical, the social process of urban neoliberal debt peonage echoes that of post-Civil War debt peonage and convict-leasing.

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INTRODUCTION

How do criminal justice bureaucracies, local government and corporate low wage employers structure the experience of prisoner reentry for race-class subjugated [RCS] urban populations? Urban neoliberal debt peonage, a concept I coin in this study, provides a specific empirically grounded answer to this question on the basis of participant observation and interview study that I conducted in a large northeastern U.S. city at a government-run prisoner reentry agency that I call "Afterward." I define urban neoliberal debt peonage as *a social process in which state and corporate actors unified by neoliberal political commitments push the formerly incarcerated racialized urban poor, typically while under formal supervision with outstanding criminal justice debt, into the low wage workforce*.

In the post civil war era, the U.S. criminal justice system utilized vagrancy laws and the black codes to incarcerate African Americans and impose criminal justice debt upon them. During this time, they had to work off this debt, which was often accomplished through the mechanism of convict leasing, where large private companies utilized prison labor. In effect these conditions reproduced much of the basic structure of chattel slavery (Blackmon 2008; Oshinsky 1997). This is the structure of classical debt peonage, an overtly racist social institution, and it serves as the model for the current study's conceptualization of the reentry experiences of the formerly incarcerated urban poor as urban neoliberal debt peonage. In both cases, criminalization and indebting of a RCS population is utilized as a prod for participation in dead-end low wage labor that benefits public and private actors with little to no benefit for the population at hand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prisoner Reentry as Urban Poverty Governance

There has been a great deal of research on the subject of the social reintegration of people leaving prison and jail, a social process that is sometimes referred to as prisoner reentry (Visher and Travis 2003). In addition to its social process definition, prisoner reentry can also be thought of as the suite of social policies that create a service provider context for people leaving prison and jail, that is typically implemented through a combination of criminal justice bureaucracies, transitional housing facilities, and community based service providers. To the extent that we focus on the service provision aspects of prisoner reentry, a poverty governance conceptualization of prisoner reentry is helpful (Halushka 2020). Scholars have pointed out that the ascendance of prisoner reentry as a policy agenda has been concomitant with both fiscal austerity, e.g., welfare reform, cuts to social service aspects of parole, and privatization, e.g., the use of block grants via the Council of State Governments (Clear 2009; Council of State Governments 2012; Mijs 2016; Miller 2014; Peck 2001). These neoliberal policy shifts have created a prisoner reentry bureaucratic field where non-profit organizations and other community based organizations operate alongside formal state organizations of parole and probation in providing services to people with criminal records. The mechanisms of service provision in prisoner reentry, which can include cognitive behavioral therapy [CBT], housing, employment, drug treatment, are typically justified in terms of their capacity to reduce the likelihood of return to prison and jail, i.e., recidivism, for the people who receive those services.

While poverty governance bureaucracies are intended help their clients, they often function as gatekeepers to restrict the distribution of meager social benefits, and to degrade, shame, and responsibilize their clients (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Similarly, there is an

increasing amount of ethnographic work that focuses specifically on the disciplinary aspects of prisoner reentry organizations themselves (Halushka 2016; Mijs 2016; Miller 2014; Prior 2020). The current work builds on this disciplinary poverty governance trend within the ethnographic sociological literature on prisoner reentry organizations by demonstrating their connection to an economically extractive social process where state criminal justice bureaucracies and large corporate employers operate in tandem to extract economic value from formerly incarcerated RCS people via criminal justice debt and low wage labor markets respectively.

Employment is among the chief mechanisms utilized by criminal justice bureaucracies and more specifically by prisoner reentry organizations (Western 2008). Insofar as employment or workforce development portions of reentry programming can be understood as part of the disciplinary aspects of prisoner reentry programming, they echo classic formulations of "less eligibility" which broadly interpret the role of punishment in society as a contributor to reproducing the wage labor relations of production (Rusche and Kirchheimer 1939) which some contemporary sociologists of punishment have explored (De Giorgi 2017; Feest 1999). Scholars have pointed towards a structural lack of opportunity (Bushway, Stoll, and Weiman 2007) and diminished human capital among formerly incarcerated young adults (Apel and Sweeten 2010). Additionally sociologists have focused a great deal on the conditions of labor markets for the formerly incarcerated who if they participate in work at all, tend to do so in the low wage secondary labor market, for less wages over time than their similarly poor counterparts who have not experienced incarceration, and in ways that tend not to preclude them from returning to prison due to the low quality of work available, i.e., unsafe, unstable hours, low pay, and no benefits (Pettit and Western 2004; Uggen 1999; Wacquant 2009). Again, employment in the

secondary labor market is a crucial part of the structure of urban neoliberal debt peonage as it is experienced by formerly incarcerated people.

The New Jim Crow and Criminal Justice Debt

Urban neoliberal debt peonage as an aspect of the experience of prisoner reentry for the formerly incarcerated urban poor is not solely a matter of employment, but is a process that is intertwined with the ways that government and society attempt to control the behaviors of the RCS urban poor. Therefore, urban neoliberal debt peonage is an extension of what legal scholar and prominent public intellectual Michelle Alexander terms "the New Jim Crow," similar to Wacquant's argument for the prison as a "peculiar institution" that is coextensive with poor racially segregated urban neighborhoods (Wacquant 2000). Alexander connects historical Jim Crow, i.e., a vast array of racist social institutions, customs, and rules, both formal and informal, unified around a principle of separation of subordinate racial groups from superordinate racial groups, to the racially disproportionate impact of mass incarceration on low socioeconomic status [SES] black men (2010). Legal scholars in particular have discussed the significance of criminal justice debt as "the new debt peonage," extending Alexander's New Jim Crow framework (Birckhead 2015; Wamsley 2019; Zatz 2015).

Sociologist Alexes Harris has extensively researched criminal justice debt, aka legal financial obligations [LFOs], and made a similar argument regarding both their targeted nature and the extent to which they reinforce already existing social inequality across race and class (Harris 2016). While policies on LFO assessment and collections vary by state and county (Harris 2016:28–41), LFOs have generally expanded in use as a complement to other kinds of sanctions, e.g., probation. Surveys show 25% of incarcerated people being assessed for LFOs in 1991, and 66% of incarcerated people being assessed for LFOs in 2004, with administrative

costs/fees rather than punitive fines making up the larger share of the increase (Harris, Evans, and Beckett 2010:1769). Harris also shows how local governments view unpaid LFOs as a potential source of revenue, and use a variety of techniques to collect including garnishing wages, revoking driver's licenses, revoking parole/probation, issuing warrants, and incarceration (Harris 2016:89). LFOs are also typically assessed for amounts that are substantially more than indigent defendants can pay in full, such that they are typically given payment plans (Martin et al. 2018). While the amount governments collect is far less than what is owed, Harris's investigation of counties in Washington shows revenue from LFO payment plans remains substantial (Harris 2016:91). Criminal justice debt, or LFOs, are an important disciplinary and extractive mechanism in the social process of urban neoliberal debt peonage as I have conceptualized it.

In addition to ethnographies of prisoner reentry specifically, the current research also stems from the broader tradition of ethnographies of race, crime, and justice outlined by Rios, Carney, and Kelekay in their annual review article (2017). While clearly grounded in an empirical research tradition, they adopt a critical perspective towards "fixed" conceptions of race, crime, and criminal justice, favoring attempts to "understand the ways in which various forms of power, social categories, cultural processes, and social conditions intersect with one another to generate systems that affect the lives of marginalized populations" (2017:494). The concept of urban neoliberal debt peonage, i.e., a social process in which state and corporate actors unified by neoliberal political commitments push formerly incarcerated racialized urban poor under into low wage labor fits very much within this literature's conceptualization of processes that impact marginalized populations.

DATA AND METHODS

Fieldsite

I conducted participant observation research from May 2013 to July 2014 for about 1,400 hours on a municipal government-run agency focused on providing prisoner reentry services that I refer to using the pseudonym "Afterward." Afterward was located in a large northeastern city in the U.S. with an active "ban the box" policy for employers. Afterward had a staff of 10 people, including case managers, life skills instructors, and upper-level management including a director and a chief of staff. About 40-60 clients came to Afterward daily to attend its CBT and workforce development classes that had an overarching focus on personal responsibility and anger management. The combination of these two courses constituted a mandatory five-week program for client participants intended to work as a corrections style behavioral intervention in the manner of programs like Thinking for a Change (Bush, Glick, and Taymans 2011). At the end of the program, Afterward assisted clients in obtaining interviews for low wage employment. Clients were on parole or probation; many came to Afterward at the behest of their supervising officer. Based on case management data (N=383), 88% of Afterward's clients were black and clients' convictions were about equally distributed among drug crimes at 36.3% (139), property crimes at 30.3% (116), and violent crimes at 32.1% (123) with five clients not coded.

Participant Observation Methodology and Role in the Field

In the summer of 2012, I joined Afterward as a roughly full time volunteer intern. The rapport I built with Afterward's staff in this summer enabled me to be seen as a good faith actor, and therefore permitted me to have access to the organization and its clients. When I began my formal participant observation research, I maintained a volunteer intern role. My activities included performing mock job interviews, assisting clients with resume building, and following up with clients for case managers. These activities facilitated social interaction between me, the

staff, and the clients at Afterward. I also catalogued documents for the Afteward employment specialist, which provided insight into types of work available to Afterward's clients. With respect to this particular study, my interactions with staff are crucial for illustrating the social policy mechanisms of urban neoliberal debt peonage.

For writing ethnographic fieldnotes, I followed guidelines that emerged out of a Chicago school grounded theoretical tradition (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). I used jottings while in the field, which I later used as a basis for long form narrative fieldnotes. I followed open coding procedures in a grounded theory manner, going line-by-line and coding phrases and passages using brief summary and analytical codes. Later I would recode this data in a more thematic fashion driven by theoretical questions that emerged out of both my experience in my field site and data. I also wrote analytical and thematic memos that acted as a bridge between fieldnotes and the genre of sociological ethnographic research.

Interview Methodology

In addition to my participant observation, I conducted digitally recorded semi-structured interviews of 57 clients and 10 Afterward staff. Participation in Afterward's reentry programming was the selection criteria for interviews since participation indicated a criminal record. Selection criteria for staff derived from their relationship to providing reentry services. I recruited Afterward clients to be interviewees by giving a 5-minute talk on my research during their classes, where I distributed consent forms. I recruited Afterward staff for formal interviews during my day-to-day interactions as a participant observer and volunteer intern. Interviews typically lasted an hour, and I conducted them at a nearby diner, where I typically paid for lunch as a small incentive. I asked clients questions about their upbringing, family life, incarceration history, experiences with criminal justice supervision, experiences with reentry programming,

and their plans to find employment and housing. I interviewed staff at Afterward primarily with respect to their views of what Afterward did for its clients. Staff provided concrete details on services and programs provided by Afterward, as well as a practitioner based view of client circumstances. Interviews were later transcribed. I followed the same coding protocols for my interview transcripts that I did for my fieldnote data, i.e., open coding, thematic coding, and memoing. In addition to this level of analysis, using an Excel spreadsheet, I tabulated interviewees' gender, race, age, conviction, type of work, work history, level of education, number of children, housing, and incarceration history. This information was from interviews, with court records used to verify incarceration history.

For the current manuscript, I utilize theoretical sampling of interviewees, a feature of grounded theoretical methodology, to identify four cases that were indicative of the broader sample with respect to urban neoliberal debt peonage (Glaser and Strauss 2012). I selected these cases based on interviewees' human capital and socioeconomic status, theoretically important factors with respect to determining an individual's labor exploitability, and in this case, their susceptibility to urban neoliberal debt peonage. In particular, I included two interviewees who had experience with more skilled work with at least a high school equivalent education, and two interviewees who had experience with less skilled work with less than a high school education. I elected to utilize a case study method (Yin 2017) to provide detailed interview evidence contextualized with individuals' social background to illustrate the mechanisms of urban neoliberal debt peonage.

Interview Sample Characteristics: Labor Market Exploitability

The fact that people leaving prison and jail are socially marginalized and economically insecure makes them easily exploitable in the secondary labor market via processes like urban

neoliberal debt peonage. In my interview sample, 80.7% were men and 86% were black (see table 1). Interviewees ranged in age from mid 20s to their mid 60s. Afterward's clients tended to have low socioeconomic status and 70.2% of my interviewees had no greater than a high school education (see table 2). In my interview sample, 30 out of 57 people described having substantial work experience, e.g., several different instances of employment or sustained employment in a particular type of work. The most frequent type of labor among interviewees was wage labor reported by 40 out of 57 people which I further categorized as skilled (13) and unskilled (27). These are designations that relate to the amount of human capital that I believe the wage labor jobs required in order to be performed effectively, with some jobs clearly requiring special training, licensing, and experience, and other jobs simply requiring basic communication and reasoning skills (Becker 1964). Even in the case of low wage secondary labor market jobs, employers cited "job readiness" as a major barrier to all potential employees, including the formerly incarcerated (Bumiller 2015). I worked inductively using jobs that clients actually held, and then roughly dividing them between what I term "unskilled" and "skilled." Roughly, I categorize unskilled work of interviewees as including factory work, retail work, truck driving, landscaping, agricultural labor, waitstaffing, and custodial work. I categorize skilled jobs of interviewees as including auto maintenance, home repair, construction work, airline mechanic, and computer repair. With few exceptions, the experience of working for low wages, particularly unskilled work, was common in the sample. Interviewees' work histories reflected their exploitable economic position from an employment perspective.

Interviewees' work experience related to their levels of education. Initially, while sampling for interviewees, I drew from CBT classes for which Afterward required a high school level of education. I also drew nine interviewees from GED classes at Afterward in order to

ensure that my sample included people who dropped out from high school. Still, even as I drew from CBT classes, among those with high school or equivalent education who specifically disclosed in their interview whether they had graduated or obtained a GED (24 out of 37), I found it was more common for people to have obtained a GED (14) than graduated from high school (10). Even though my sample included fewer high school dropouts than generally observed for people leaving prison, I suggest that among this group the attainment of a GED frequently covers up a "dropout" experience. Again, their levels of educational attainment reflect their exploitable economic position from an employment perspective.

Interviewees also frequently lacked family support, which had consequences particularly for their housing as well as their overall economic stability. Only 15 of 57 interviewees were living with a family member. Eight lived in community corrections centers [CCCs], eight were on work release (jail), and eight lived with significant others. Other interviewee living circumstances included house arrest, shelters, and sober houses. Only two clients rented an apartment and only one client lived in a house they owned.

The preceding three issues, work history, educational attainment, and lack of family support, are all connected to the limited resources that make people susceptible to the experience of urban neoliberal debt peonage as a part of prisoner reentry. However, the negative credential of a criminal record, is another part of this experience. Sixty-one percent of interviewees (35) mentioned they had substantial difficulty obtaining employment once they had a record. This was particularly the case for clients who had experience in skilled wage labor. Out of 13 clients who had experience with skilled wage labor, 10 reported attempting to find employment in their previous area, only to find that options they once had were no longer available. In general,

employer reluctance to hire people with criminal records is a well-known feature of the low wage labor market landscape (Pager 2009).

My interviewees had limited resources due to a variety of factors including work histories tending towards low wage labor, levels of education that rarely went past high school, and a lack of family support. They also faced an unfriendly labor market due to the effects of a criminal record. As a result of limited resources and threat of criminal justice sanction, my interviewees often came to Afterward seeking employment. These conditions are key structural components of the experience of urban neoliberal debt peonage.

INTERVIEW CASE STUDIES OF URBAN NEOLIBERAL DEBT PEONAGE IN PRISONER REENTRY

Urban neoliberal debt peonage is the push that people with criminal records experience into the secondary labor market. To what extent are variations in SES and human capital attributes of the formerly incarcerated important for understanding how urban neoliberal debt peonage functions as a social process? As mentioned earlier, 40 of the 57 interviewees in my sample reported participation in wage labor. For my interview case studies, I focus on interviewees from two subgroups, i.e., skilled and unskilled labor, as they are the largest subgroups within my sample with respect to human capital and SES characteristics and are also the most representative of those who tend to be impacted by the criminal justice system. Overall, my case studies illustrate that urban neoliberal debt peonage pushes both subgroups towards low skilled work, such that people with more human capital experience urban neoliberal debt peonage as downward occupational mobility while those with less human capital experience urban neoliberal debt peonage as labor market reincorporation.

Thirteen people (22.8%) in my interview sample had experience in skilled wage labor. Two of the interviewees from this group, Marquis and Dennis, shared stories about their work histories and seeking of work that were illustrative of the social process of urban neoliberal debt peonage. Marquis was black and in his mid-thirties. He discussed that he had been convicted of selling drugs in the suburbs of the larger northeastern city. He recalled that in his sentencing hearing for his conviction he had to choose between 2-5 years in state prison or 1 year of bootcamp with 5 years of parole. He chose the latter and came home on parole.

Marquis explained that he violated parole with charges of public drunkenness and disorderly conduct following an argument with his soon to be ex-wife and a night of heavy alcohol consumption and drug use. He was arrested by the police in the early morning after the argument had taken place. He explained that he spent two more years in jail because of that violation, which I corroborated with court records. Marquis was living in a CCC, and participating in Afterward's CBT programming.

In our interview, Marquis brought up his acquisition of technical skills through vocational training, some of which he had brushed up on while he was paroled to a CCC after coming home from bootcamp. He placed a special emphasis on his job at a motorcycle factory, mentioning the job at both the beginning of the interview, and when I later asked him about his employment history. It was the most recent job he had held before getting downsized. He described it as a job that gave him the opportunity to use the technical skills that he developed, in spite of the fact he was not part of the union like other employees and did not receive any medical benefits. Marquis said that the job paid $17.00 an hour, and that he would have been content to work there. He said, "If I could go back there I would." When I asked him what jobs he had before his motorcycle job he said, "Before my last job, I couldn't really call anything

employment, they were more like jobs, like cashier jobs, warehouse jobs, labor jobs. My last job it was more like a job it was alright, more like a job, *a real decent job.*[1] It wasn't like I was just doing this until the next."

I saw Marquis about six months later at Afterward, when a custodial services agency was cooperating with Afterward to hire their clients. I had not followed up with him since my participant observation ended, but when I checked court records again, I could see that Marquis had been incarcerated for a parole violation, and that he had about $4,000 in outstanding criminal justice debt, i.e., court costs and fines. In addition, his requests for parole that he made in the months subsequent to his incarceration in the county jail had been denied.

The economic and legal pressures that push Marquis towards jail or deskilled low-wage work are indicative of urban neoliberal debt peonage as follows. With some technical skills and work experience, Marquis had the human capital to earn a living for himself. However, paroled to a CCC, Marquis was either unwilling or unable to rely on his family for housing, which speaks to his overall economic condition. Marquis also talked about how living at the CCC was difficult. They expected him to pay rent, but they also made it difficult for him to search for employment independent of agreeing to participate in a program like Afterward, by limiting the number of passes that would allow him to leave. Additionally, when he was able to leave to search for employment, he was unsuccessful. The economic pressures of court costs and fines, rent from the CCC, and basic needs led Marquis to seek out Afterward multiple times in search of employment. However, Afterward could not lead him to that "decent" job like he once had. Marquis is being pushed into the deskilled workforce by a combination of factors in spite of his

[1] Emphasis mine

human capital which include: 1) his economic insecurity, 2) his outstanding criminal justice debt and CCC rent, 3) informal pressure from pass-withholding CCCs to participate in reentry programming at Afterward rather than seeking low wage employment independently, 4) his criminal record impacting his success in finding the skilled work that he used to have, and 5) Afterward, a reentry organization, forwarding him to deskilled work. All of these factors together are indicative of the social process of urban neoliberal debt peonage.

Dennis's story is similarly emblematic of the experience of prisoner reentry as urban neoliberal debt peonage. Dennis was black and in his early fifties. He was living in a CCC at the time of our interview. Dennis discussed his experience in the security industry. Dennis graduated high school, and got certified to work in law enforcement with lethal weapons. He described a long career, in which he started work as a doorman, worked as security at hospitals, college campuses, and car dealerships, worked with security agencies, and finally in retail "loss prevention." Dennis said that he had been fired from his most recent security job because he had recently picked up three violent crime misdemeanors.

Me: Can you now continue to work in the security industry with misdemeanors on your record?

Dennis: Right. I'm finding that before when doors were always opened for me, now I'm having doors close on me. One of the reasons why I partnered up with Afterward because obviously they do a lot in the networking in the city. There's various companies who receive huge tax credits for hiring people in my situation. Right now I'm looking to partner up with [grocery store] for a loss prevention position that they have at one of their stores. [Grocery store] is one of the biggest partners with the city for hiring ex-offenders.

M: That's right. It seems like it would be a good fit for you.

D: It seems like that would be an excellent fit for me. I'm currently critiquing my resume now.

In his account, these misdemeanors emerged out of his frustration in attempting to physically discipline his live-in girlfriend's child, who had cognitive and behavioral issues. His attempt to physically discipline his girlfriend's child led to her calling the police, which made him angry, leading to a violent confrontation with his girlfriend. Dennis said that when the police arrived he was arrested. Dennis was subsequently convicted, and required to pay a civil penalty to his girlfriend according to the court records. Court records show that there are no records of him being currently incarcerated. Court records show he had lingering fines and fees of about $500 for which the court gave him a payment plan. Dennis thus far had not made a single payment, and his fines were referred to collections.

I confirmed that this supermarket chain was a key partner for Afterward in hiring people with criminal records, usually full time, to work for them. While a typical retail employment wage was $8.00 an hour, if Dennis were to obtain a loss prevention job at this supermarket chain, that position would very likely pay more and be a continuation of his career. This would be a lucky break for Dennis, given that he would typically face barriers in any sort of security or law enforcement work. While this was not the case for Dennis because of where he lived, a number of states require occupational licensing for security guards. A violent crime conviction for a security guard who may be required to use legitimate violence responsibly in the course of their duties raises questions about impulse control. From an employer perspective, it would be easy to see how this presents the risk of a negligent hiring lawsuit should a loss prevention security guard employee use unreasonable violence in the context of work, e.g., seriously injuring

someone in the course of being arrested for theft. Even with Dennis's work experience, it is much likelier that he would be hired to work at the supermarket chain in a non-security capacity. Thus, like Marquis, in spite of his credentials and work history, he is being pushed towards unskilled work in the service sector that Afterward can provide, because his criminal conviction makes him both de facto ineligible for the type of work he previously held and newly exploitable with respect to the unskilled low wage work force. His lingering criminal justice debt, and his being pushed towards low wage labor provide evidence of urban neoliberal debt peonage as a key factor with respect to Dennis's experience of reentry.

Unlike Marquis and Dennis, a little less than half (27) of my interview sample disclosed that they had work histories in unskilled low wage employment. This includes all of the people that I interviewed who were high school dropouts. Two of my interviewees, Thomas and Sebastian, were both indicative of this criterion.

Thomas was black and in his mid-twenties, and lived with his brother and uncle to whom he paid rent. Thomas explained that he was adopted by his aunt after his mother relinquished legal custody when he was two years old. While he did not know his father personally, Thomas claimed that his father, who had been in the Navy, would send his aunt small amounts of money. Thomas described encounters with the police—he first received probation at age 16 as a result of an assault charge, saying he was jumped. Not long after, at age 17, he explained he was convicted of selling drugs to an undercover police officer, which led to his first experience of incarceration. He had since been convicted twice for selling drugs as an adult, though he said that he was no longer on probation. Thomas's incarceration forced him to drop out of high school, and he was currently enrolled in Afterward's GED classes, which was where I met him.

Thomas described some of his experience with unskilled low wage labor in the context of his attendance at Afterward, "I'm looking for a job. I want a check. You know, It's been a long time I got a paycheck. I worked at McDonalds. And I was getting my life together but I went, I moved to [nearby state] with my friend and I was living there from summer to winter and I did good. I talked to a couple managers and shoveling the snow out there." While in a local public high school, Thomas had also worked with a local hospital due to a partnership that the school had with the hospital. Clearly, Thomas had work experience, albeit the type that reflected his status as a high school dropout.

Thomas explained that he was romantically involved with a young woman who became pregnant with his child. He expressed that his impending fatherhood was part of what motivated him to try to gain employment. Thomas wanted to be able to provide for his child without assistance of this young woman's father, who was a pastor. In our interview, he reflected on this:

Thomas: When I got her pregnant, [her father] stopped taking me out. He'd take me out now but my thing is I don't like to ask. I don't want to ask. I want to do it on my own. I'm in my late twenties and I'm going on a straight path.

Me: Are you feeling responsible for this child?

T: I'm very responsible. I just make dumb choices in my life and I'm trying to get over that and make a way to fix that problem. I was a drug bug. But I never carried guns. I never kept one on me but I just, I did drugs, I liked the things that came from selling drugs.

Me: Right. There's a lot of money.

T: There's all kinds of stuff, but I just came home. I just did almost a year… My whole thing is I would start something and have a sidetrack which means I might get locked up. I'm locked up and I can't do what I wanted to do, and that always happened to me my whole life. My last placement, I just picked up a book. And that's another thing, I never picked up a book on the street, in school. I never did homework. I didn't have F's but I didn't have A's. I was like right in between, always I was looking for the shortcut.

Me: But now you feel like you want to learn more.

T: Yes because there's some stuff I don't know. I'm trying to make sure I do it because I'm about to have a kid now.

With his new baby on the way, Thomas expressed desire to avoid crime. With financial support of the father of his child's mother, Thomas may have reduced financial pressure to provide for his child. His participation in Afterward's programming may help him to obtain the kind of minimum wage employment he had held previously. Should he obtain employment, it might help him with some financial obligations, including about $600 in outstanding criminal justice debt. The economic bind that Thomas is in is one of the major factors in the push of urban neoliberal debt peonage towards the secondary labor market. Even before Thomas had his child, which increases his prospective economic obligations, it was clear that he felt a need to supplement his minimum wage income with income producing criminal activity. In the context of urban neoliberal debt peonage, alongside the economic costs of raising a child, men with criminal records who have low SES who avoid crime will struggle to meet their economic obligations.

Similar to Thomas was Sebastian, who was Puerto Rican and in his early 20s. At the time of our interview, Sebastian was in work release after being convicted of a drug charge and coming to Afterward for GED classes. Sebastian explained that his upbringing included a number of supervisory juvenile placements. He described these placements as "very supportive, but I'm hard headed, I like the streets. So just stuck to the street. I took in some of the knowledge and stuff, but I like the streets, all I know is the streets, since the age of 7, I've been running in the streets, my family like, they always punished me for doing bad, but I'm hard headed I did what I wanted to do." The last formal school Sebastian was in was an alternative school. However, he said that he dropped out of that school 2 months before the end of his senior year to go work with his father full time in a landscaping job. He explained his plan was to complete his GED then go into the military. However, he explained how he felt this would be difficult for him:

> If I get this GED, this is over, my life is gonna go this way, if I can't get this GED, I see myself still on the streets. As I said, I'm trying to come around the corner little by little. I'm still like, I got a job waiting for me right now. Whenever I go home, I'm working the same day I go home, I'm gonna work for my father, landscaping. It's seasonal. So when the season is over, if I don't get this GED they said you can do GED on the computer, I don't know how true that is, but I'm going to look into it. School, it's gonna be a tough challenge for me. I cut ties with a lot of people in the streets, I see them around here, they're like 'hey what's up' and I'm like 'I'm out of it' because I know if I give them 5 to 10 minutes of my time, I'll get pulled in, it's over. Once you pull me in you can't take me out until you put the cuffs on.

Despite his expressed desire to turn the corner, court records showed that between our interview and the time of writing that Sebastian was arrested and convicted 4 separate times for producing and selling drugs since 2014. Court records indicate that he is currently on probation and he has about $1,200 in outstanding criminal justice debt.

Sebastian's decision to sell drugs is a response to the conditions of urban neoliberal debt peonage. Sebastian could attempt to gain formal employment to cover his living costs and criminal justice debt payments, perhaps working through connections his father has with respect to landscaping. However, this kind of work, while remunerative for someone without a high school education, is seasonal, as he points out. While it is unclear if Sebastian sought out legitimate employment through Afterward, it was certainly clear from the court records that if he had, he was attempting to supplement his income through illegal means, much like Thomas. By selling drugs and rejecting the conditions of urban neoliberal debt peonage, Sebastian ends up experiencing reincarceration.

Urban Social Policy: Making Debt Peonage Neoliberal

Who benefits when people leaving prison and jail take up unskilled low wage work? Based on my observations it was quite clear that large corporations had the most to gain from employing them. Neoliberal social policies like tax breaks for employers who hire people with criminal records are typically framed as a "win-win." Employers win by getting a break on the cost of their employees' wages, and people leaving prison and jail are likelier to get their economic footing, and therefore less likely to reoffend. The concept of urban neoliberal debt peonage lays bare the flaws in the rationale for tax breaks, by drawing our attention to the exploitative nature of the labor market in the context of criminal justice coercion and urban poverty. Even if we grant the validity of the "win-win" rationale for tax breaks, I observed in

implementation that benefits primarily accrued to employers. In the context of my study, the employee tax-incentive program active through local government effectively reduced the employer's wage cost to $5 an hour for a full time employee being paid $10 an hour. Employers receiving tax breaks for hiring employees with criminal records is a clear attempt at pursuing mechanisms to increase employment among those with criminal records, who are typically underemployed.

Jennifer, a public safety bureaucrat, was responsible for the implementation of an employee tax-incentive program. Jennifer was white and in her early thirties. In speaking with Jennifer informally about the implementation of these hiring incentives, she disclosed that it was built into the guidelines that employers could only benefit from these tax breaks when hiring employees who had participated in Afterward's programming. She explained that this requirement constrained implementation and effectiveness of the tax incentives, since there are many more people with criminal records seeking employment than those to whom Afterward is providing services. Jennifer attributed this requirement to the desire to have Afterward as an organization benefit from the incentives by attracting more clients.

Here we encounter difficulties with implementation of the tax incentive policy based on its own standards of efficacy. The director of Afterward, not as concerned with the intended employment promoting purpose of tax incentive policies, but more concerned with organizational performance, limits the eligibility of the policy to employers who hire Afterward program graduates rather than the broader group of people with criminal records in general. With respect to this issue, if we accept "win-win" reasoning as valid, then the policy is lacking in effectiveness because in implementation it provides fewer incentives for corporations to hire people with criminal records than it could without Afterward's prisoner reentry programming.

Matt, the Afterward employment specialist who was white and in his early thirties, also expressed skepticism about the efficacy of tax incentives for hiring. When I discussed incentives with him, he said that most employers were not interested in the amount of paperwork, fulfilling the numerous requirements, or opening themselves up to the tax department. According to the 52-page application guidelines, employers had to fulfill a number of requirements, including communication with the city's tax department, plans to operate within city limits for 5 years, and having qualifying employees for at least half the year that are paid the same as other employees. Matt observed that with these types of requirements, corporations large enough to have personnel departments were in the best position to benefit from the tax incentive programs. The many hours of time I spent with Matt's employment records also allowed me to observe patterns among employers who were able to take advantage of tax incentives. While reviewing these forms it became clear to me that it was one of the largest corporations in the city that was consistently able to take advantage of the tax incentives, with smaller employers almost never doing so. Tax incentives fit well with a "growth machine" conception of urban governance with large corporations cutting costs at the expense of local government in a way that dovetails with their place based interest (Logan and Molotch 1988). While people leaving prison and jail are pushed into the secondary labor market through Afterward, corporations effectively defrayed their labor costs via tax incentives while the state recoups some of the costs of those tax incentives through the collection of criminal justice debt. With active state support of the economic interests of large corporate employers via hiring based tax incentives, the neoliberal dimensions of urban neoliberal debt peonage are clear.

There were also issues with respect to the actual implementation of employment referral services at Afterward that undermined the argument that they were of benefit to people with

criminal records. Matt's primary responsibility was management of the demand side of the labor market. As he explained to me, Matt followed cycles of employment in the labor market, and maintained open communication with employers. By doing so, he was able to provide a much higher probability of employment to clients than they would have on their own. However, the types of employment that Matt was able to forward Afterward clients towards varied in their quality in ways that had important implications for the social process of urban neoliberal debt peonage.

I was well aware of the types of jobs that Afterward offered because of the time I spent organizing employment records. Matt described his job opportunities in terms of tiers. The first tier jobs were full time jobs that could pay up to $13 an hour. These were typically custodial service jobs. Other full time employment included jobs through a staffing agency, super market jobs, and warehouse jobs. While these paid more than minimum wage, they typically paid less than custodial service jobs. The lower tier jobs were part time employment, which were sometimes referred to as "transitional work" or "seasonal work." These jobs were often tied to specific events like professional sports games, or festivals open to the public. These jobs had a wage that often did not go higher than $10 an hour and were sometimes minimum wage jobs. Case managers at Afterward did what they could to lobby Matt to provide their clients with the full time opportunities, but Matt was selective about providing them, preferring to give them to clients he believed had the best chance to succeed. One case manager told me "I just saw one of my clients and I told him to go ahead and try for Burger King. At least that's full time."

In the implementation of employment services, Afterward was an important part of the social process of urban neoliberal debt peonage. Afterward, by offering employment services accompanied by targeted social service programming is able to recruit people with criminal

records into the workforce though a variety of mechanisms on the supply and demand sides of the low wage labor market. Tax incentives for large corporations that hire people with criminal records are a key mechanism on the demand side of the labor market. However, they are also an example of how large corporations benefit from providing employment opportunities, even when they are only part time, and do not provide much stability for Afterward's clients.

Stories from interviewee case studies indicate that the way they experience employment in the secondary labor market typically does little to stabilize their economic status and overall life circumstances. Forwarded to dead-end deskilled work facilitated by reentry organizations takes on a disciplinary character in this context. If people are unable to participate in legitimate work in a way that can help them come to terms with their economic obligations, with criminal justice debt being among them, then work becomes a trap as opposed to a pathway to stability. The concept of urban neoliberal debt peonage lays bare the conditions of secondary labor market (re)incorporation as a form of economic extraction and racialized carceral control that it is.

URBAN NEOLBIERAL DEBT PEONAGE: ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION AND RACIAL CONTROL

Urban neoliberal debt peonage is a way of conceptualizing the conditions of people with criminal records that highlights not only behavioral control, but economic exploitation. Criminal justice bureaucracies are often conceptualized in terms of their behavioral control, but criminal justice debt is a punitive method of extracting revenue from people who are typically among the poorest in society, which my interviewees struggled to pay back. This is part of a broader trend in criminal justice as a way of extracting resources from the RCS urban black and brown poor. We see similarities in the Obama DOJ's scathing report of the use of citations, fees, and fines in Ferguson, MO as generating the second largest stream of revenue for the local government

though we also know this pattern is not limited to Ferguson (DOJ 2015; Henricks and Harvey 2017). Mississippi has "restitution centers" where people are held not for a sentence, but rather for a dollar amount (Wolfe and Liu 2020). In restitution centers, incarcerated residents work low wage jobs externally to pay off restitution while being charged by restitution centers for rent, readily comparable to historical debt peonage and convict leasing. While my interviewees on parole were not sentenced to dollar amounts while living in CCCs, by extracting rent, restricting movement, and prodding residents towards workforce development reentry programming, the CCCs created conditions for my interviewees that were comparable to those of Mississippi restitution centers, which provides more warrants for the comparison of the conditions faced by my interviewees to historical debt peonage.

Urban neoliberal debt peonage relegates people to the secondary labor market, a common pattern among my interviewees that I found in spite of variation in human capital. In the case of skilled workers, like Marquis and Dennis, who made up 22.8% of my interview sample, they are facing the prospect of downward occupational mobility due to the effects of a criminal record, i.e., a move from the lower rungs of the primary labor market into the less secure secondary labor market. For unskilled workers, like Thomas and Sebastian, 47.4% of my interview sample, they are forwarded towards the same type of dead-end secondary labor market employment opportunities that they had previously. Urban neoliberal debt peonage is racialized in terms of its disparate impact on low income urban black men, who made up the greater portion of my interview sample and the organization's rolls, though low SES latinx men like Sebastian also fit the definition of RCS population (Rios 2011).

To the extent that people who are leaving prison manage to avoid future incarceration as a result of the employment services provided by prisoner reentry organizations, it is difficult to

argue that this is an undesirable social outcome. Nevertheless, even in the best case scenario, the concept of urban neoliberal debt peonage emphasizes the extent to which state bureaucracies and corporate employers coordinate in an extractive relationship with people with criminal records, a group which tends to have very little to extract, via surveillance, the imposition of debt, and exploitative low wage labor. The economically extractive and exploitative dimensions of the concept of urban neoliberal debt peonage complement its obvious racial control implications.

LIMITATIONS

There are limits on what can be said based on four cases derived from 57 interviewees recruited from one specific reentry organization within one single northeastern city in the U.S. Certainly, these results are not intended to be understood as generalizable to all prisoner reentry experiences, but are illustrative of a social process that impacts RCS groups of people. Additionally, semi-structured interviews did not always provide complete data with respect to all variables of interest, such that interviewees did not discuss always all aspects of their socioeconomic status and family life, hence some "unknowns" in table 2.

Experiences of individuals may vary substantially with respect to their labor market reincorporation. Reentry organizations vary with respect to the mechanisms that they employ, their sources/amount of funding, whether they are private or public organizations, such that individual organizations may vary with respect to the impact that they have on their client populations (Kaufman 2015). For instance, reentry organizations may employ methods that indirectly influence employment outcomes, such as substance abuse treatment or mental health treatment (Gowan and Whetstone 2012). Exploring employment effects of these indirect mechanisms would be a fruitful area for future research on prisoner reentry. Beyond differences between organizations, a rural reentry context is likely to look a lot different than an urban one

particularly with respect to its saturation of service providers (Marwell 2007), i.e., an urban context is likelier to facilitate labor market reincorporation than an under-resourced rural area.

The present study does not include analysis of the five white men in the sample. However, it is worth noting that all of my white interviewees had substantial work history in work that was skilled or better, all were high school educated, and two had college degrees. Had I conducted research in a rural area, with perhaps a higher percentage of poor whites with criminal records, this may have altered the extent to which the experience of debt peonage was racialized. Nominally, it is possible for poor formerly incarcerated whites to be caught up in urban neoliberal debt peonage. Much like how Alexander argues whites are "collateral damage" in the New Jim Crow, urban neoliberal debt peonage is definitionally tied to the spatial concentration of RCS groups. Moreover, this spatial concentration is borne out by black overrepresentation in my interview sample and Afterward's client rolls compared to the population of the large northeastern city.

CONCLUSION

The current study utilizes the concept of urban neoliberal debt peonage to answer the research question: how do criminal justice bureaucracies, local government and corporate low wage employers structure the experience of prisoner reentry for RCS urban populations? Urban neoliberal debt peonage conceptually captures the ways in which supervised populations are pushed into the low skill wage labor market to the economic benefit of state and corporate actors as a part of the prisoner reentry experience. Evidence from my interview sample suggests that people participating in prisoner reentry service provision almost all have low SES, with relatively low levels of education, and work histories that are primarily in low or middle skill wage labor. Moreover, most of my interviewees had little economic support from their families,

which added to their overall economic instability. Additionally, interviewees stated that they had substantial difficulty finding work. For those whose overall economic insecurity and outstanding criminal justice debt were not enough to motivate to accept reentry social services, supervisory criminal justice bureaucracies like probation and parole can use a variety of informal and formal sanctions to push towards reentry organizations like Afterward. Effectively, RCS people experiencing urban neoliberal debt peonage are presented with a choice: accept reentry services and low wage employment to maintain good economic and political standing with criminal justice supervisory bodies while likely struggling with serious material deprivation, or risk future sanctions from those same bodies and a return to prison or jail as a result of engaging in income producing criminal activity.

While the state takes money from a criminalized population through mechanisms like criminal justice debt or LFOs, the state subsidizes corporations through mechanisms like tax incentives for employers to hire people with criminal records. While corporations have the costs of their wages substantially cut with incentives, the work itself is often inconsistent and typically not enough for people to maintain subsistence living, particularly if the state receives a portion of those wages via criminal justice debt payment plans or wage garnishing. In the context of urban neoliberal debt peonage, people's freedom is not contingent de jure on their ability to earn an income as it is in Mississippi restitution centers. Urban neoliberal debt peonage is a de facto debt peonage, a type that is more typical of what occurs within the context of what sociologists refer to as the colorblind era, in which explicit legal discrimination is outlawed even as racial control and inequality largely remain (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Urban neoliberal debt peonage as a concept contributes to the ethnographic work on prisoner reentry as poverty governance as well as the ethnographic literature on race, crime, and criminal justice by simultaneously highlighting

both economic extraction and racial control social processes that structure the prisoner reentry experience.

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Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Population

Characteristic	n (%) (N=57)
Gender	
Male	46 (80.7)
Female	11 (19.3)
Age, years	
20-29	21 (36.8)
30-39	14 (24.6)
40-49	15 (26.3)
50-59	6 (10.5)
60-69	1 (1.8)
Race	
Black	49 (86.0)
White	5 (8.8)
Latinx	3 (5.3)

Table 2. Relevant Social Characteristics of Study Population

Characteristic	n (%) (N=57)
Number of children	
0	7 (12.3)
1	6 (10.5)
2	11 (19.3)
3	9 (15.8)
4	3 (5.3)
5	1 (1.8)
8	1 (1.8)
Unknown	19 (33.3)
Education	
Less than high school	9 (15.8)
GED or high school	31 (54.4)
Some college	6 (10.5)
College	3 (5.3)
Unknown	8 (14.0)
Substantial work history	
Yes	30 (52.6)
No	11 (19.3)
Borderline	3 (5.3)
Unknown	13 (22.8)
Work type	
Unskilled wage labor	27 (47.4)
Skilled wage labor	13 (22.8)
Managerial work	3 (5.3)
Professional work	2 (3.5)
Disability	1 (1.8)
Unknown	11 (19.3)
Conviction[a]	
Violent	27 (47.4)
Drug	18 (31.6)
Property	10 (17.5)
Driving under the influence (DUI)	2 (3.5)
Incarceration history	
Prison	31 (54.4)
Jail	24 (42.1)
Probation	2 (3.5)

a: Conviction for most serious offense for clients with multiple convictions